PIDGIN ISLAND

By HAROLD MacGRATH

CHAPTER X.

When Greek Meets Greek.

WHEN I was a lad—first person, singular, perpendicular again—I entertained several exaggerated ideas, pardonable distortions of an over nimble imagination, supplied at various times—now in the woodshed, now in the garret and again from my geography—by the romances published by Mr. Beadle of fearsome memory.

Among these boyish fallacies was an almost ineradicable impression that a man to be a villain must look the part—bestling eyebrows, hooked noose, a blue black mustache with dagger points and a shiny plug hat atop it all, or a bloody bandanna if he happened to be a pirate.

He was invariably going about the accomplishment of his nefarious plots with much "a-ha-ing" and "o-ho-ing!"

For a long time I "shadowed" the alderman in our ward, hoping to catch him in a counterfeiters' den or red-handed in an abduction.

Upon a certain day I was confronted with the appalling information that he was the meekest church deacon in town. It was a rough blow, totally unexpected.

I was staggered.

There was a kink in the social fabric somewhere. Close upon the heels of this disillusion came the thundering revelation which bowled me over completely. The kindly old man with the gray side whiskers who gave me pennies and patted me on the back had made a fortune selling spurious mining stock to orphans and widows and shop clerks.

It took me some time to readjust my outlook upon life. But the final crash which embittered my soul and made a misanthrope of me till I had puppy love was the shattering of the idol to whom I had given my boy's hero worship.

Handsome, young, debonair, poor, courted, famous for his affability, he had married a woman for her money, and had given nothing in return; denied her children, mocked her with his affairs, and was even known to strike her.

Servants' chatter turned this loose. It wasn't a beautiful thing for a boy to learn. I lost faith in humanity, and I haven't regained much even to this day.

My father did not find it necessary to moralize over my questionable regard for the tales of Mr. Beadle.

I myself took them out to the rear of the house and made a bonfire of them.

Shortly after I stumbled upon one D'Artagnan and milady and his eminence; David Copperfield and Mr. Heep; the false Stuart and Beatrice; Vautrin and the distinguished provincial, Valjean and Javert.

I was sixteen at that time, and I gleaned from that wonderful treasure house—my father's library—that heroes and heroines of all shapes and color were principled men and women—just that—living and dying in honor, roughly or meekly, that all others were true villains.

So, then, I come to Smead.

Put out into the streets at the age of five, he had grown up like a weed, strong, hardy, unprincipled.

To begin with, he had never had any principles, and never acquired any. Later, in his manhood, he wrote down one law for himself: "Don't get found out."

Early in his career he had fallen in with boxers and prize fighters, and he soon became known as a great little "tryout" man. He followed this game for several years, never smoked, never drank, read a good deal, studied and practiced all known games of chance and corrected his speaking English, learning in some odd way that the well spoken man went farthest.

At twenty, blond as a viking, of beautiful body, affable, winning, he made his first smokeroom trip. The intellectual veneer hoodwinked all the women aboard and nearly all the men.

It was a profitable trip, as smoke rooms go. He became the most expert ship gambler in the business because he worked alone, which seems rather an impossible feat to the layman. He took infinite delight in playing the gull to his kind and plucking them.

He was twenty-four when he put up his first gambling establishment.

It made money from the start. And with rare foresight he never visited the place at night during the play. He would generally drop into the cashier's office early in the afternoon, balance the accounts and leave.

Thus he was unknown to all save his employees and the police, who blackmailed him regularly once a month. His Atlantic trips now became few and far between.

He began to smoke and drink circumspectly, for none knew better than he what a good business asset a clean, healthy skin was. He became a member of two or three fairly decent clubs.

He was getting on. The street urchin and the "tryout" man were forgotten.

He married.

She was the daughter of a rich man whose forbears had been rich when New York was known by another name. The father strenuously objected to the match. With the blind obstinacy of her sex she ran away with Smead and was promptly disinherited. Perhaps the poor woman knew two or three months of happiness.

Smead had married her with an eye to the future millions, and upon seeing them take wings the veneer cracked. He enlarged his gambling enterprises, took up ship gambling again, drifted into the fast set of the city, let his long smothered desires run riot. All the evil in him developed with the sinister rapidity of nightshade.

His irons and fires became multifarious. He tried his hand at smuggling, not for the pecuniary gains so much as for the sporting chance it offered. He became as closely watched as any man in the world, but time after time he slipped through the customs.

Often he was not smuggling at all; just pure deviltry to keep the inspectors and the secret service on the jump. They believed he stood alone, never suspecting that he was the brain and heart of a colossal organization.

The poor, foolish woman who married him died of a broken heart, for women die of that as surely as they breathe.

Here you have him, a picturesque villain under his thatch of gray, of a type common enough in cities.

Petty rascality. On the race tracks and in his gambling establishments he was called square, a sporting term for any one not found out. Oh, he was generous and free handed—outside of his home.

And there you have the gist of villainy. It is at his fireside that a man is proved. We who meet him outside at the clubs, in the hotel lobbies, we vote him a first rate chap, but before we give our confidence let us see the wife who waits and watches at home.

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"Well?"

"Going along finely," said the doctor. "You are naturally robust."

"How long before I'll be able to throw this cane out of the window?"

"Perhaps two weeks, if you are careful. No whisky. I don't think tobacco will hurt you. Good morning."

No whisky.

Smead grinned at the lighted end of his cigar. They little knew him. He drank because he liked it, not because it had any hold on him.

Give him credit for that much; he could stop it; he had done so many a time. For two weeks, then, nothing stronger than coffee should pass his lips. He scowled down into the brilliant, sunshiny street.

The only man who had ever brought him up with a jolt; a club loafer, a society tea drinker, a fellow who bought his clothes in London and wore spats; a government sneak who had spoiled his sport. He would make Cranford regret the day he had meddled with him.

He looked at his watch.

Eleven o'clock. He ought to be here now, unless the lake was too rough. He peered up at the sky, blue as a robin's egg.

And then the door opened.

"Ha!" said Smead with satisfaction. "How's the leg?"

"Better. I've cut out whisky for two weeks."

"I told you to. Well, everything on my side runs like clockwork. I'll have Cranford out of the way in a night or two. Now what's your news?"

"The steamer makes Quebec day after tomorrow; perhaps tomorrow night. You trust that agent of yours?"

The son laughed. "Not an inch. Something better than that. Fear. He knows me: a false move means prison."

Smead nodded approvingly.

"The right idea. Now listen. Don't go fooling around the water in the morning. That's the time I'll wire you. May send a night message. I haven't asked you how you got your hands on these things."

"Don't. I shouldn't tell you."

"All right," amiably. "I agreed to back the game for a third. That's enough for me. You've got a head on you. But don't forget that Cranford may have done some advising."

"All due to you. If you hadn't dropped in he'd never dreamed of anything off color. But what's the use of arguing with you?"

"No use whatever. At best he'll never tumble—he'll only worry and wonder. I'd give ten thousand to break him."

"You can break him physically, if you want to."

"What's the good of that? I know his breed. You don't break that sort physically. You break him socially."

"My words. But there's a fine chance of that. I tell you there wasn't a scrap of paper as big as a postage stamp that I did not go over."

Smead took from his pocket a newspaper clipping. He passed it over to his son.

"Ah!"

"You never told me about that."

"Why should I have told you? My affair that." The young man laughed. "Good pupil, though. What?"

"Pay," said Smead, "what I've done has been for the love of the sport."

"Ah, indeed! It was just the love of sport that made you teach me how to riffle a cold deck, mark an ace with my thumb nail and all that—just love of sport."

"You'll land hard one of these days, Don."

"Supposing I do? But perhaps I shan't. Maybe I'm going to turn over a new leaf, hunt up a new country and live straight under another name." The son eyed his father. Smead's face bored into his.

"Go your way, where you like and when. But I'm hanged if you ever lay a hand on my pile when I'm done for."

"That's tough luck! But would you like to know what I'd do with it if you left it to me? I'd give it to orphan asylums, old ladies' homes and hospitals—the places you've helped to fill."

Smead drew in a long breath slowly. "What did you do with those emeralds—the real stones for which you substituted the paste? I'll tell you this, my lad—I never plucked anything but fat gulls. I never took a dollar from a woman."

"You thought you were going to when you married the mother?"

A chalky pallor overlaid the tan on the son's face. "Who knows what you have done?" He stepped close.

With amazing suddenness the great powerful hands of the seated man reached out and caught the young man by the wrists, whirling him to his knees.

With his face but a hand's span away he said: "You puppy, stir and I'll break your wrists, so help me! Try to come it over me with your tongue, eh! Thought because I can only hop around on one leg I'm something to stick pins in? What the devil's got into you?"

In Smead's heart there was admiration for the nerve of the boy—not a flicker of the eye, nor did the lips even stir.

"Too strong for you, eh?"

"I'll admit that. You were too strong for the mother. I've been thinking about her of late."

"Leave your mother out of this conversation."

"Can you forget her?" panted the boy. "You were only six when she died."

"Six. That may be, but there were five years of terror crowded into each of them. If you twist any further you'll break the right one, and if you do I'll kill you later on."

Smead flung him aside.

The boy got up, brushed his clothes, rubbed his wrists and wiped the sweat of agony from his forehead. "I've a notion you'll be sorry for this bit of gallery play. You ask me what I did with the emeralds. I dropped them in the poor box at Monte Carlo. A great week! Never told you about it, never let you in." Then, in cold, level tones: "I'll tell you the truth about the Princess Xenia's emeralds. I swore I'd never tell a living soul. Two men she sent to hades were friends of mine, once upon a time honest. I sold the gems and divided the cash between the two widows. It wasn't a legal restitution, but they'll never be any the wiser. And as for the princess, there are some millions of fools left. So you see, I'm not the pupil you thought I was—weak heart and maudlin sentiment. All Paris said I was in love with her."

"No, they didn't say that. It was the other way around, and you abused her."

"Runs in the family," was the answer.

CHAPTER XI.

A Kiss.

CRANFORD and the girl sat on the ledge at Tibbet's point.

"Cast a glance at this old comber galloping in," Diana said. "Some water there. Shall we move? We'll get a ducking when she hits."

"Let's stay. O-a-a-a-ah, what a big one!" She huddled her shoulders and twisted one foot about the other. They waited, laughing like two children. Nearer and nearer the mighty roll of water came; no sign of a crest; higher, greener. It held them like some spell of enchantment. Then it smashed against the ledge with deafening noise.

The impact sent a shudder through the ledge, as if some giant's mailed fist had buffeted it. Somehow, as the spray and foam flew up at them greedily, their hands met and their shoulders touched.

The movement was neither temperamental nor sentimental; it was instinctive; one quite naturally shrinks from an approaching blow. But the resultant effect upon Cranford was like wine—madness, rather, for he brushed her cheek with his lips.

"Forgive me, but I did not mean to do that!" he cried penitently, when it would have been much better to say nothing.

"We are very foolish—or, rather, I am," she replied coolly. "It is my fault that we are both drenched."

She wiped the water from her face and inspected her dripping shoes. "We should be sent to bed without supper."

Fear left him. She hadn't noticed; or, better still, she chose to ignore the temporary insanity.

Now, during this bit of comedy an automobile had drawn up on the far side of the lighthouse. The two on the ledge had heard nothing, since they could hear only such sounds as the wind carried to them.

A man stood by the side of the car. He watched the two thoughtfully, saw the comber rise and break, saw the inclination of the two toward each other and Cranford's harmless folly. There was no doubt of it, it was she.

Beautiful always; and now with the sun on her hair and the wind on her cheeks—an oath burned his lips. He made as though to step forward, but held the impulse in check. Had he not wilfully forfeited his rights? What had brought her here?

Cranford espied the car as it rolled down the incline into the road along the shore.

"Some one from the hotel," he said as he noted the license number. "Shall we return to the farm? You will catch cold."

"Come. The walk will warm us both. Are there many at the hotel?"

"Except for two chaps from Philadelphia, I'm the lone fisherman. They haven't had a chance to get out yet."

It was quarter to 6 when they arrived at the farm.

"Tomorrow," she said, and turned and walked toward the farmhouse, stopping only when she reached the door.

She laid her hand upon her cheek. How briskly he strode away! She wondered if he was whistling. The manner in which he held his head suggested it. He had kissed her, but it had been only a boy and girl kiss—clumsy, awkward, diffident, honest.

The thought of it warmed her heart a little. He hadn't meant to do it. May she never be forced to accept tribute from any man less innocent than that kiss. He did not love her; he only imagined he did.

As Cranford mounted the hotel steps a smile lay hidden in the crook of his lips.

What were these chaps up to? The short, wiry man with the stubbly black mustache he had instantly recognized as one of the two men he had seen in the hotel bar just before leaving New York.

The handsome chap was without doubt the same Warren had advised him to watch. At the train gate he had not been able to take an accurate impression of the young man's face, the light being insufficient, but the scar made his identity a certainty.

Mr. Hanchett and Mr. Dennison; very good. He had joined them in a game of three cushion billiards the previous night, and they had played remarkably well. It amused him to think that if they were laughing in their sleeves there was room enough in his for a smile.

"Hello!" he said, stopping before their rocking chairs. "Hard luck you chaps are having. You'll get out tomorrow all right, though. The gale is blowing itself out. If I were you I'd try the bay over the way. There's been lee there, and bass will have gone in."

"I'll be glad to meet Mr. Bass," said Mr. Dennison, stroking his mustache.

"That's the trouble with the water up here," said Mr. Hanchett, folding his newspaper. "Great fishing grounds, but it blows too much."

"You have fished here before?"

"Oh, no! The guide has been telling me. How about a little game of billiards after dinner?"

"Glad to." Cranford proceeded into the office.

Mr. Hanchett smiled, and Mr. Dennison coughed slightly behind his hand.

"Not a tumble," murmured Mr. Dennison.

"There's where you're wrong. He recognized me—how I don't know—the moment he laid eyes on me. Just a little start, but it was enough for me. Now he thinks we think he doesn't know us, and on that side I'm going to get him."

"And how? He doesn't drink, and he stays around the hotel after dark."

"He'll be going out to the farm, as they call it, one night. We'll watch."

"An attraction out there?"

"Yes," briefly.

"Good nerves. We may have trouble."

"Trust me for that. What do you say to a little game of pinochle?"

"Dollar a hundred points?"

"Anything to pass the time. He will not go out tonight. We might fake a message."

"He may know her handwriting."

"H-m! Anybody you know?"

"How should I know her?" Mr. Hanchett shrugged. "Come on, let's get the game started. Odd thing, but I always think fast when I'm playing a hand, and I've got to do some tall thinking."

Cranford put on his slippers, read a little while, rose and walked the length of the room several times. He thought of two men leaning against a bar, one big and the other short and wiry. He heard the toast—the fisherman's toast.

"Pidgin island!"

"Square away!"

Where was the big fellow who had offered the toast that night. Possibly with Smead. He must look sharp.

"Not one iota, Donald Smead!"

"Mr. Hanchett—Mr. Hanchett, if you please!"

"I wonder under how many names you have gone in these six years!"

"A good many, Di."

"And how many lies have you told—to other poor women?"

"Count the planets. I have often marveled over the breeding quality of the first lie. A stone upon still waters—who knows where the ripples end? 'When first we practice to deceive!' There's a deal of truth in those old chaps, the poets. Well, lying came naturally. As other lads were taught patriotic odes from fourth readers, I was taught to lie. Lord, but I'm accomplished! What are you doing up here in this God forsaken hole?"

"It is not God forsaken!"—quietly.

"Perhaps it is my outlook. To me all places are more or less God forsaken. After all, Di, I have some excuses."

"Once upon a time you had—not now."

"You think, then, that I've had my chance?"

"I know it. I tried to help you. There was a time when I would have given my heart's blood to help you, but you lied to me and tricked me."

And now?" He crushed the eagerness which sprung with the question.

"I would not turn my hand to save you from prison." She uttered the words without heat.

He knew that she meant it.

"That, as my beloved father would say, is a haymaker flush on the jaw. What an old prize fighter he must have been! Di, in your heart you know you wouldn't let me go to prison."

"I would. It might be the saving of you."

"Dear little Methodist—or is it Presbyterian? Repentance? What a word, smuggest of the smug; rolling eyes, clasped hands and lying lips!"

"Do you never think? Do these things never return to haunt you—the broken lives, the knavery, the dishonor?"

"I don't believe in ghosts, Di. Besides, it is easy to shoo them away."

"You are really incapable of telling the truth."

"Well, yes—sometimes they come knocking.

"They follow from room to room; bolts and oak panels are nothing; but presently I remember where the whisky stands on the sideboard, and poof! they go scrambling out the way they came."

"And when the horror of drunkenness is gone?"

"Oh, then it's morning; sunshine and work to do. I wish I could see your face." He struck a match.

She did not flinch. The flame burned till it nipped his thumb and finger, then he dropped the writhing stick to the ground, where it glowed a moment and went out. "Good nerves, Di. Not afraid of anything, are you?"

She did not answer.

"Well, there never was any cowardice on your side or mine."

"Moral?"

"Physical. I have the courage of my crimes, you the courage of your virtues. Chaste Diana!" He laughed. "Do you realize that you are one of the two living things I love?"

"The other?"

"Irony, eh? Myself, you would suggest? No. Truth is, Di, I despise myself as heartily as you do."

Quickly he caught her by the shoulders. "What is this man Cranford doing? Is he making love to you? Answer!" He shook her.

She put her strong fingers under his and flung him back.

"Ah! You love him!"

"Don't touch me again, Donald," she said quietly.

"There's a long score against him. Well, well, if hurt comes to him, do not put all the blame on me. I'm not alone. The pater is in Kingston. If he had his way Cranford would go out to sea, drifting. I told him I saw you. Rotten old world! Do you really hate me?" he added.

"I hate the life you lead."

"Never coming back?"

"Never!"

He swung about abruptly, the shadows filled in behind him, and he was one.

(Continued next Saturday.)

MILAN

Mr. and Mrs. W. F. Nichols went to Atkinson, Ill., Sunday to attend the funeral of Mrs. H. V. Hedman of East Moline, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Macafee of Atkinson.

Miss Fae Rhoadarmer and Herman Williams of Milan visited Sunday in Orion with Miss Bertha Rhoardarmer.

Miss Ethel Guldenzopf returned home after spending the week end with Miss Bertha Rhoadarmer in Orion.

Mr. and Mrs. H. E. Ditzen of Milan visited Saturday with Mr. Ditzen's mother in Davenport.

Mr. and Mrs. A. Fluegal and Mr. and Mrs. H. E. Ditzen of Milan visited Sunday with Mr. and Mrs. Ed Schaeffer, south of Milan. The gathering was in honor of Mr. Schaeffer's birthday.

The Young Ladies' club of the Presbyterian church was entertained Friday at the home of Mrs. George Sydnor, Jr. After the business meeting a social time was enjoyed and a light lunch was served.

Mr. and Mrs. Otto Larson have returned home after visiting a few days with friends in Galesburg. They made the trip in their auto.

Mrs. Henry Wilson and Mrs. William Mosher of Milan visited Sunday with the daughter of the latter, Mrs. Ben Wolters, in Rock Island.

Mr. Garlick of Cedar Rapids visited Sunday with Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Bolton.

Little Zella Brahmer, daughter of E. G. Brahmer, is very sick with complications at her home.

A party was given at the home of E. G. Brahmer Sunday in honor of the birthday of Meri McCullough of Milan.

Mrs. Frances Campbell of Rock Island is making her home for the winter with Mr. and Mrs. John Campbell in Milan.

Miss Bertha Hofer of Edgington is visiting with Mrs. William Ferns in Milan.

Bruce Looby of Rock Island visited with friends in Milan Sunday.

Mr. and Mrs. L. R. Williams of Milan were entertained at the home of A. Brasher, south of Milan, Sunday.

The friends of Miss Ruth Ruge, formerly of Milan, will be glad to know that she is able to be about again after several weeks' illness. She visited at the home of Mrs. Ben Wolters Sunday.

Quite a large number of Milan people attended the opening services at the new Science church in Rock Island Sunday.

All the news all the time—The Argus.